

BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 1/2013:

GUADELOUPE IN 16 HOURS



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In December 2012, I visited both Martinique and the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean, with Air France flights between the islands. The nowadays unreliable Air France canceled my leg between Santo Domingo and Fort-de-France, without any compensation (reclamation in process with EU customer rights administration), but retained the Fort-de-France – Santo Domingo leg, including an overnight stop at Pointe-A-Pitre, Guadeloupe. The stop, for many passengers a 16 hour problem, was a welcome advantage for myself, a chance to not only to see the island's lone endemic, the attractive Guadeloupe Woodpecker (*Melanerpes herminieri*), but four other limited range Caribbean endemics, with minimum expenses.



Fig. 1. The Antilles and the location of Guadeloupe, as shown at San Juan airport, Puerto Rico.

On the 21st December, my flight arrived at Pointe-A-Pitre a bit early, enabling an 11 PM call to Pro-Rent car rental, which I had already mailed a few times from Finland and called from Martinique, to make sure I would actually get the car out of office hours. Otherwise, my plans were completely ruined, because their office would open only at 7 AM the next morning, too late for my target species at Corossol, Basse Terre (the mountainous Western half of the island).

The person in charge promptly replied and arrived at the airport, picking me up to a close-by parking lot where a brand new Hyundai I30 was waiting. The car cost me €64 for the day, the late arrival fee (€20) included. My other option had been Sixt, but they replied far too late, with a €90 quote.

At first, I got lost on the highways though the capital Pointe-A-Pitre bottleneck, partly because of foggy windows and partly as a result of a misleading map. There is no grand by-pass north of the airport, as printed on maps; the highway is still on the planning table. Eventually, the signs to Basse Terre took me to the right direction, in the middle of many youth speeding in their supercharged cars. An intersection to Vernou was eventually discovered, to the cross-island highway D23, up to the Les Mamelles (!) mountains and the western coast.

Beware, these roads have no shoulders at all but deep ditches instead, and the locals drive just as aggressively as the French do in Europe! I stopped at Maison de Forêt parking area, preparing myself for a few hours sleep in the car. Few hundred meters earlier, the junction to my final destination, the signposted Corossol picnic site by the Ecrevisses rapids (Cascade aux Ecrevisses) had been passed on the left. That is where I returned for the night.

Instead of the rough track described in previous trip reports, the picnic site access road was flawless tarmac. The whole area had been tastefully and sensibly restored by European Union funding, with a new parking loop and other improvements for day visitors. I parked my car in the lonely parking lot by the rapids, saw a young feral cat hunting a rat by the picnic tables, and soon fell asleep on the car seat. The stress of making it had exhausted me, particularly in regard to the flight and the delivery of the rental Hyundai.

The wake-up was three-and-half hours later, at 5.10 AM, and birding started after a field breakfast, even though the light was not really favorable before 6.25 AM. Till 9.15 AM, nobody else arrived there, despite the day being a Saturday, 22nd of December. By the main road, the parking areas filled up earlier than at Corossol.

The construction at Corossol had changed the setting, making trailheads more difficult to locate. In fact, I was not able to locate them, with the exception of the trails starting at Maison de Forêt (I crossed the hanging bridge but did not go further). Likewise, the gravel track north of the D23 had apparently been abandoned and swallowed by the forest. Another one was there, but it was gated.

Nevertheless, all this hardly was a problem in terms of finding the target species, as everything could be seen with ease at the picnic site, within the first hour or two, by walking around the picnic tables. The Corossol site was a veritable birder's 'honeypot' for Lesser Antillean endemics. Additional photography opportunities were available at Maison de Forêt, where a number of birds, mostly tremblers and thrashers, attended the establishment's outdoors Christmas buffet as uninvited guests. A public toilet (€0.50) was available by the bridge of the Corossol River, in a tourist shop. The picnic site does not have any toilet or overnight facilities.



Fig. 2. The Corossol (Cascade aux Ecrevisses) picnic site parking loop. The best spot is on the right.

The following species were noted at the Corossol area. The weather stayed calm and sunny during my visit and this probably helped in locating the birds with relative ease. I had recordings for each of the species but there was no need to use them.

Personally, I prefer to avoid playing the calls and songs, if that is not absolutely necessary. For maps, check out the excellent Lesser Antilles report at the norththailandbirding.com website. Vernou, Cascade aux Ecrevisses, Corossol and Maison de Forêt are, however, well located on most general road maps and Google Maps, too.

Target species:

Bridled Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon mystacea*): One rather tame individual with striking colors frequented the picnic tables by the rapids, mostly on the left, for one and half hours starting by 7 AM. There were plenty of photography opportunities as the bird gradually got used to my presence. The views could not have been better. Unfortunately, I only have an inferior Lumix pocket camera, more suitable for tourist shots and especially sensitive to low light conditions prevalent in tropical forests. Moreover, it is an active species, always on the move.



Fig. 3. A stunning Bridled Quail-Dove, standing on a picnic shelter platform.

Guadeloupe Woodpecker (*Melanerpes herminieri*): A party of five woodpeckers frequented one of the tall trees at the picnic site, staying there for twenty minutes before advancing across the river. Great views.

Brown Trembler (*Cinchoerthia ruficauda*): Only single bird was at the picnic site but several bold ones were located at Maison de Forêt and a number of others were zooming across the main road. The species appears to be rather common in the area. Excellent views, particularly of birds stealing food at Maison de Forêt.

Forest Thrush (*Cichlherminia lherminieri*): The star species of the site, with excellent views (but no photos) of two individuals at the picnic site (left hand three tables) and one along the access road (also singing at dawn). The Forest Thrushes often stood in full view on ground or on low branches of bushes, constantly flicking their tails, but preferred to stay in the shadows. The shy birds could nevertheless have been easily photographed at Corossol, with a focused effort and additional time. Well aware of the limits of my Lumix, I knew when to give up.

Plumbeous Warbler (*Dendroica plumbea*): Four adult birds were observed, with excellent views, in more closed forest edge situations around the two tables in the far left of the site.



Fig. 4. A Brown Trembler, the most conspicuous bird species in the area, and especially at Maison de Forêt. The eye is bright yellow, unlike with the Grey Tremblers of Martinique, which had white or yellowish white eyes, and a pale grey belly.

Other bird species:

Purple-throated Carib (*Eulampis jugularis*): Very common in the area.

Antillean Crested Hummingbird (*Orthorhynchus cristatus*): Common at the picnic site, with several close views.

Caribbean Elaenia (*Elaenia martinica*): Five vocal individuals were spotted during the morning.

Scaly-breasted Thrasher (*Allenia fusca*): Particularly common at Corossol, with at least 12 individuals. Easily spotted in mid-storey situations because of the species' clumsy movements.

Pearly-eyed Thrasher (*Margarops fuscatus*): About five individuals at Corossol and Maison de Forêt. The first one was seen sitting on a picnic table.

Antillean Euphonia (*Euphonia musica*): One was recorded at the Corossol picnic site, in a tall tree.

Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla noctis*): Common at Corossol. A female bird was not only tame but disturbingly so. It repeatedly landed on my hands and shoulders and needed to be chased away a few times to allow undisturbed observations of other birds. At 9.15, a father with two girls arrived and requested me to vacate the only occupied table, their favorite, where the girls started to play with the tame bullfinch.



Fig. 5. A male Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, subspecies *dominicana*.



Fig. 6. I guess you wanted a closer look? Birds are well habituated to human presence at Corossol.

Additionally, Cattle Egrets (at Jarry), feral Junglefowl, a Mangrove Cuckoo, Grey Kingbirds, two Bananaquits (Jarry), only six Carib Grackles (Jarry), a Yellow-faced Grassquit and an Orange Bishop (E of Vernou) were spotted.

The car was returned at Pro-Rent office in the Jarry industrial area west of Pointe-A-Pitre. There were several petrol stations on the way, also in Jarry. Filling the tank up cost €15. The car rental company had frequent shuttles to the airport, based on demand. All in all, their services proved to be both reliable and economical, and can therefore be recommended to others, too.



Fig. 7. Both the Forest Thrushes and the Bridled Quail-Dove preferred these riverside bushes.

